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[Sharjah bazaar]

products of Bombay and Birmingham—gaily-hued sarongs, shirts and scarfs—vie with cloths of native weave, and woollen cloaks washed, spun and woven in Dubai. Most of the drapers have a little haberdashery section, comprising pins, scissors, reels of cotton, tape and ribbons, in a glass case.

Foreign visitors usually find most delight in the carpet shops, where rugs from Ispahan, Sheraz, Kerman and Bushire lie in neat piles on the wooden floor; rugs of exquisite dyes and patterns may be obtained by those who are willing to pay the high prices demanded to-day—sometimes a hundred per cent higher than they were before the war. Really old and valuable carpets are rare and can usually be obtained only in Persia or India. There is, of course, the inevitable fake; a modern carpet designed in the seventeenth century style, which has lain in the streets of Teheran until the feet of goats, donkeys, camels and humans have worn it into the 'antique' texture.

A good modern carpet, of delightful colour, design, weave and nap, measuring about eight feet long by five feet wide, can be bought for sixty or a hundred rupees, according to the quality. For the poor man, there are machine-made rugs and carpets of traditional design, made in India, which cost from twenty rupees upwards. It is always advisable, however, to seek the advice of an expert when buying carpets in Arabia.

The 'mixed' general shop is usually worth a visit, for here one may find the wristlet watch or fountain pen which one lost in mysterious circumstances. Watches of good Swiss or American make are on sale at reasonable prices; my own 'Novoris', which came from Sharjah, cost only four pounds. Fountain pens, sunglasses, rings and brooches, adorn the shelves side by side with Muscat daggers, canned goods and foreign cigarettes. Between every half-dozen booths is squeezed a café or coffee-shop, where the Arabs laze away the afternoon to discuss business or the affairs of the town. Nearly all business deals are talked over in the dark corners of a coffee-shop, where a wheezy portable gramophone screeches interminably the latest Arab love-songs, most of them discreetly pornographic.

I liked best to stand outside the bakers' booths and watch them make bread or rice-cakes. The dough would be kneaded and pummelled into shape in a bowl-shaped depression on a stone slab. When judged to be of the right consistency, it would be placed on a long-handled ladle, the blade of which is latticed like

252 a grid-iron, and placed directly on the glowing embers of the oven. Baked in this manner, the flat loaves of unleavened bread were crisp and brown in a few minutes, and tasted delicious. Arab children would crowd round the bakers' shop in little groups, fascinated by the dexterity with which the baker tossed the dough into the air with the ladle before consigning it to the fire.

326 In the quarter of the town where the tinsmiths and ironsmiths plied their trades, one could always be sure of finding something of interest. Here the shops of the blacksmiths exhibit all their primitive skill. A sheep's or pig's bladder is used as a bellows, and the fire, anvil and the blacksmith are all contained in a deep pit. Tools, nails, wrought-iron ornaments and domestic utensils are made in this crude manner from long iron bars, or 'scrap', [415] which is imported from India. The tinsmiths are equally dexterous in the manufacture of pots, pans, kettles and bowls, the basic material for which is provided out of old R.A.F. petrol cans. Some of the tin bowls are extremely decorative, being washed in copper and engraved with a hand-beaten design.

As we strolled away from the bazaar we encountered Hassan bin Ahmidfa, the young pearl merchant; he proved to be an excellent guide and companion, having a good sense of humour. He conducted us through a maze of alleyways until we came to the Street of Silversmiths, where wrinkled old men sat cross-legged, making their trinkets. Hossein, a white-haired smith with a beard and blue eyes, squatted over a hole in the ground filled with glowing charcoal. He kept this at the right temperature by means of a small sheepskin bellows. The silver he uses is made from rupee coins, which he melts down and then beats into thin wire.

306 He produced a tray full of semi-precious stones—agate, jade, chalcedony and jasper, some carved with Arabic inscriptions—which he uses as ring-settings. The stone Sparkes had chosen was a fine oval chalcedony with the words 'Mohammed bin Ali' engraved in old script. The setting consisted of a central hoop of thick silver, with two loops of twisted silver wire, hinged on either side. It looked barbaric, and the silver was rough and unpolished, but it made an effective ornament. I gave an order for a similar ring, to present to my wife, the cost being agreed, after some haggling, at five rupees.

294 Returning to the bazaar, we passed the tailors' shops, where 413 men sat cross-legged on little wooden stools, sewing by hand or by machine, and I was reminded of the cobbler's scene in *Chu Chin*